

MAHATMA

and

Other Poems

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HUMAYUN
KABIR



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For

PREMENDRA MITRA

POET AND PLAYWRIGHT

Contents

<i>Mahatma</i>	<i>Page</i>	I
<i>Rabindranath Tagore</i>		3
<i>Trains</i>		4
<i>My Brother's Face</i>		6
<i>After Schools</i>		7
<i>A Birthday Offering</i>		8
<i>Life</i>		9
<i>Bewitched</i>		10
<i>The Ship</i>		12
<i>Faith</i>		14
<i>Birth of Venus</i>		15
<i>Attic Marble</i>		16
<i>Birthday</i>		17
<i>Parting</i>		18
<i>Invocation</i>		20
<i>Twilight</i>		21
<i>Frustration</i>		23
<i>The Quest</i>		25
<i>Comrade</i>		27
<i>The Sea</i>		29
<i>The Flower and the Sea</i>		30
<i>Spectre</i>		31
<i>A Challenge</i>		32
<i>Prisoners</i>		33
<i>Doubts</i>		34
<i>Wanderlust</i>		35
<i>Taj Mahal</i>		36
<i>Jahan Ara</i>		37
<i>After Death</i>		39
<i>Evening in Bengal</i>		40
<i>The Koel</i>		41
<i>Song at Night</i>		42
<i>The Voyage</i>		43
<i>The Padma</i>		45

Mahatma

Across vast spaces and vast times he strode
buoyed upon the hopes of an ancient race
achieving courage out of dark despair.
Like a huge serpent resting coil on coil
slept the vast country in involuted sloth,
but a breath of life stirs every vein—
for Gandhi breaks the charm of magic sleep,
brings back life till age-long lassitude
drops like old dead skin from frozen limbs.

A puny figure strides upon the scene
of vast and elemental suffering : Strides
against a background where slow death
paints in dull phantasmagoral grey
the end of all endeavour, hope and faith.

What secret magic transforms the scene ?
Whence springs forth a deep abiding force
that thrills the landscape with abundant life,
till the puny figure dominates the scene,
over vast and elemental suffering triumphs,
and with new birth's pang and radiance shoots
the landscape's dull phantasmagoral grey ?

The static, dead and slothful continent
thrills to a new song of hope, of forward move.
The momentum gathers, the masses shake
and strain and quiver for the onward march
from slow decaying death to resplendent life.

A lone figure stands upon the sands of time,
stands upon the shores of India's timeless space,
draws upon its vast primeval wells

of granite suffering and immemorial hopes :
Launches India's resistless caravan
into adventures new, a perilous path
where out of Life's substance must be carved
new values, new direction, order new—
Gandhi, Mahatma, India's leader, India's soul.

2 October, 1942

Rabindranath Tagore

A snow-capped volcano in undulating plain
Lifts up its proud head ; near its foot
Cluster the vine and the soft streams flow :
Men come and go and build their homes
And pass their days in homely joys and fears.
The mountain keeps them company, sends to them
Its love in flowing streams and gentle rain.
And yet the mountain lives alone
In distant splendour. Lightnings flash,
The thunder shoots up tongues of flame—
Tries to reach the snowy heights in vain.

The fire of fourscore summers in your heart,
Fourscore winters' wisdom on your crest
Shine in forms of beauty in deathless verse.

Bareilly

7 May, 1941

Trains

Mother, I sit by my window for hours on end
And watch the long trains rumble past.
Some are dark and journey tediously,
No doors, no windows, no shining lamps.
Slowly they move : like huge elephants
That move like shadows in the shadowy dark.

Sometimes a train comes flashing past
With many windows lit by many lamps
That dance and whirl with movement swift.
A marriage procession with music loud,
Shrill whistles that rise above the din
Of the rhythmic beat of wheels revolving fast.

On hot afternoons you go to sleep
And with dizzy heat swoons all the world,
Even the crows doze and forget to caw,
The dog lies in the shade with hanging tongue.
I watch for hours and still the tireless trains
March on and on along their iron road.

Sometimes at night in my sleep I hear
The low distant rumble of the train.
I rub my eyes and sit up on my bed
And beneath the light of the flickering moon
Moves the long shadowy outline far away
Like a huge serpent crawling through the night.

Where do all these trains go day and night ?
You say they bore their way through hills,
They roar over bridges across mighty streams,
They crash through forests and vast plains,
But at the end of their restless journeyings—
Where do they go and finally rest ?

20 September, 1932

My Brother's Face

He lay a long-dead corpse before our trenches bare,
Burnt with bright sunlight and cooled by evening dew.
All day long I sought to look him in the face
And ever firmer felt he was my brother lost.
Through the long hours I watched him lying dead
And felt his voice above the joyous song
Of weary men who welcomed end of war.

Even in my sleep a wailing note
Trailed through troubled dreams. A voice sighed,
'Brother, my brother, have you too forgotten me ?'
I left the trench and walked out in the night
And built for him, a stranger, a comrade's grave.
My eyes played false but my heart knew true :
A brother's face smiled at me from every corpse.

(From Heinrich Lersch)

8 August, 1932

After Schools

The vacuity and the emptiness,
The lack of confidence,
The frozen fields of phantasy
Oppressing the deadened sense,

The sky one drab grey of clouds,
Unhurrying unceasing rain,
No core of living consciousness
Quickening the heavy brain,

A torpor of body and of heart,
A palsy of the soul,
Under an ocean's continuous dumb
Monotonous roll.

June, 1931

A Birthday Offering

I have no gifts worthy of you and wonder
What I shall bring to you on this your birthday.
I have no splendour in my heart and no possessions in
the outer world,
Nor have I the artist's craft to shape new worlds for you.
Only in my mind linger scraps of forgotten songs,
Torn, shredded clouds that drift across the memory.
I cannot remember today even the tunes that once I knew,
And yet the music I have never heard moves my spirit
to strange yearnings.

Destitute and bankrupt, my soul is lost in longing
between what I had and could not keep,
And what has never yet been mine.
Forgetful of what it achieved and garnered in the past,
It seeks greedily after what is unattained and yet far away
in the womb of some dim futurity.

This my incessant quest to the borderlands of our earthly
world,
This my restless and dissatisfied longing for the far horizon—
With humble hands I bring to you as my gift.

5 May, 1931

Life

Who shall explain to me the tragedy
of love unrequited ? Of deferred hope
that wearily treads the downward slope
of untimely death ? The sweetest melody
is hushed before the final harmony
has solved the discord of the tortured soul
struggling through conflict to its goal
to pierce th'enigma of life, to solve its mystery.

Perhaps after all there's no enigma here.
No mystery to solve because there's no mystery.
Only the painted shadow of a huge mockery
whose pretence we see through when we near
and gaze intently at its vacancy,—
no magic, no beauty but only a hideous leer.

June, 1930

Bewitched

I travel alone a wanderer through the world
Along the path leading beyond the limit of the sky.
I look behind and see the far-flung road
Winding over hill and dale, through foreign lands
And across streams unknown. Shapes and sounds
Of the past move dimly upon the rugged track :
Hopes that continually die into memories.

I have seen the shadows deepen in dark eyes,
Found on olive face the form of dreams,
Watched the glory of laughter on rich lips.
But speech falters suddenly and words come no more,
The smile is swamped in bitter tears,
And the gloom of pain dims the flashing eyes.
But with dazed mind I go blindly on.

To unfamiliar worlds and among unknown men
The path has led me at evening and at dawn.
Foreign flowers with fragrance strange and new
Awake formless desires and unbodied hopes,
Soft languorous dreams of the idle heart.
I lie back at the sky to gaze and let the canoe glide.
But with startled start I remember I cannot stay.

The morning sun hides behind the western clouds
And all the sky is aglow with liquid gold.
At the close of day on the eastern snows
I saw Night blushing in her bridal robes
While with tender hands as his parting gift
The sun crowned her with the last ray of gold.
But I know I have not reached my journey's end.

May that path never come to a final end
And I'll not sorrow even though home I never reach.
I have struggled over many a rugged hill,
Crossed rivers and lakes and forests wild,
Crossed the shadow and light of tears and smiles,
But still the track stretches infinitely on.
And day and night I go forward steadily.

May, 1930

The Ship

My heart a drifting ship upon the deep
Day and night its shoreless water ploughs.
 Forget the rudder's lost : Spread full the sails.
 Let storms toss us from all quarters of the globe.
 Even if there be no goal, there is the open sky,
There is the boundless expanse of the sea,
And ceaseless sailings across its wastes.

 Sometimes I festoon my ship with many lights
 And make it glad with song and music notes.
I weave garlands and through the long night sit
In expectation of a fellow voyager on the main,
But night moves tardily and yet no comrade brings
 Till dawn at last peeps through edge of sea and sky
 And my ship still drifts along its aimless course.

Under strange sun and moon in foreign lands
I have oft for a little while moored my ship.
 I have watched the exchange of many hearts
 And seen acquaintance bought with laughter glad
 Pay for its purchase in interest of tears :
But the time flowed on and with anchor drawn
My ship started again on its unending voyage.

 Under the dazzling light of the midday sun
 On the burnished waters the mirage burns.
But then light fades and from the east
Shy Evening gently steals upon the world
And blushing at cloud maidens who blush back deep
 Spreads her bridal bed on wave-tossed sea
 Under the calm, kindly eyes of old Father Sky.

In alien seas under the magic of the moon
Emerald islands dawn upon the sight.

 The stir of floodtide wakes through all the sea,
 The breath of southwestern fills the sails,
 Forward along its white, foam-flecked way
The ship rushes through the furrowed waves
Transcending death in its urge of life.

April, 1930

Faith

She believed, she said, and there was nothing more to say,
And all my eager questionings over life and death
Seemed on the sands of time like children's play,
—I drew in my breath.

I thought perhaps Revolt carried itself too far,
That Heresy could never find a gospel of its own,
Our quest of truth is waste of soul, but peace for her
Lay in faith alone.

December, 1929

Birth of Venus

The floor of the sea was paved with roses and I saw
All the gold of the twilight heaped upon your flowing hair.
You stood naked : unvestured and unadorned,
With the shyness of the dawn gleaming in your eyes,
One soft hand holding your hair to hide a maiden's shame.

The other hand lightly pressed your throbbing breast
While like a lotus rose your form against the sky.
Child of Light, can the night with its darkness hide you ?
The morning sun wove you a cloak of transparent light,
What need has one so beautiful of any other robes ?

The lines of your slender body reflect your tender mind.
Beauty flows in colour and curve and shine and shade.
The golden locks drift down you shoulders shy,
The glow of morning rests on soft, sweet face,
A deer in the forests of the mind, Maiden, you stood alone.

April, 1929

Attic Marble

On a golden April evening by the river bank
You saw, Poet unknown, your sweetheart in the woods ?
She whom you always sought but who always baffled you
Suddenly appeared before your wondering eyes ?

Perhaps to bathe at even came some country maid
Along the forest path with twilight shining on her hair.
She suddenly stopped loosening the girdle from her waist,
And stood still as a statue forgetting why she came.

The village maiden went back home when light had failed.
But the poet carried away in his heart the picture shy,
The nymph who with arrested movement for a moment stood,
Under the fading evening light till night shone with stars.

The beauty of maiden body he shaped from cold, hard stone :
Standing startled with half-discarded robes by the water side,
Alarm in her timid eyes and Youth's triumph in all her limbs,
Snatching at the slipping mantle to hide her budding breasts.

April, 1929

Birthday

I remember that on my birthday no flowers bloomed.
Time and again I have erred in my journeyings.
Under the stress of movement I have in the lightning-flash
Of clouds on dark *Sravana* nights seen the gleam
Of dawn in the eastern sky. In the dead of night
I made loud the deserted way with morning hymns
In the illusion of my dreams. But I have always known
That on my birthday the blossoms did not come.

Early spring with faint, timid heart
Knocks softly at the gates of sleeping earth.
The flower-children cradled in subterranean castles dark
Lift up drowsy eyes to come out into the open air.
When you have gathered the blossoms to weave my crown
I shall know that for me the flowers have bloomed on earth.

22 February, 1929

Parting

I

Slowly into the horizon faded away the coast
Clothed with hills and forests green. I stood alone
Upon the crowded ship and felt far away.
I saw the vast open sky and saw beneath
The blue waters of the sea in restlessness
Yearning upward with uneven waves.
No speech they know: destination have they none,
Nor aim nor forward urge, but day and night
In vain fury they circle round themselves
Like men who make themselves the centre of the world.

I left behind my world of childhood's grief and joy,
The earth beautiful with the suffering of first youth,
The known familiar paths, and all the hearts
That lit my world with rich summer smile.
From the far open sea across the rugged waves
With longing eyes I saw the land basking in the light.

1 *September*, 1928

II

The infinite sky above, the boundless sea below.
Deep speechless silence holds the universe.
Dim stars light lamps in the moonless night.
The sun of the eastern sky hides in the western sea.
I feel I have travelled through endless ages there.
I cannot remember now when my voyage began.
The deep ceaseless moan of the foam-flecked sea
Weighs heavy on my consciousness by night and day.

Suddenly the stillness is rent by lightning flash :
The memory of laughing eyes with the hint of tears
Gleaming behind the smile. Who stays behind
With patient mien but deep glowing heart ?
Lakshmi sits alone in a land beyond the dreams.
Day and night swell the dark dividing seas.

15 September, 1928.

Invocation

Evoke today in your flaming eyes the glow,
The freedom and the radiance of the rugged mountain-top,
Till the mind's torpor and the failings and the faults,
The dream-desires vague—a forest undergrowth
That twines round the feet and progress checks—
Are burnt to their roots and utterly destroyed.

Life like a rocky crag rises steep and sharp
With a precarious track along the precipice
Faintly struggling on. The nothing-daunted heart
With uncircumvented daring goes building on
Its dream of heaven new. If there, brave heart,
The fragile dream is shattered in the stress
Of scaling the dangerous heights, in despair
If the wounded spirit sinks wearily down
And sudden darkness overwhelm the world
While mind and body reel at disillusion's heavy blow,
In the dark night a flaming brand of hope
Let your soul burn to ashes my despair.

September, 1927

Twilight

Behind the buildings of the city the golden sun
Painted upon the massed evening clouds
Pictures bright with flaming brush, till light grew pale
And the colours slowly faded out. We sat with dreaming eyes,
And through the transparent darkness of the eve,
Gazed at the crowded roads lit by many lamps
Where men and women move about with ceaseless steps.
You sat silent with tired brow resting on your hands
And gazed far away where the fading sun
Touched with pallid rays the canvas of the dark.
In the unlit uncandled room your dusky eyes
Shone like stars in some deep cave of pain,
And your heart yearned with passionate love of life,
Its rich spectacle and shifting pageantry.

I spoke to you in words that are for ever gone from me.
Were they soft words of love? Through the dark *Asharha* sky
The lightnings flash from cloud to cloud: did my eyes
Flash to yours my call of love? Words of comfort
Did I whisper to you in low affectionate tones?
Like the kindly night that with gentle dew
Attempts to call back to glad life again
The faded flower scorched by the summer sun?
Or did I speak to you of hopes and dreams,
Of one faint ray of light that will not die—
That proclaims the triumph to come, though all around
The world seems sunk in wakeless death?
I only remember your eyes blazing in the dark:
The flash of diamonds deep down in the mine,
The first proud gleam of light in the primeval gloom.

You looked at me with your dark mysterious eyes
In whose depths I gazed in amazement mute
And saw spaces beyond, regions unexplored
And glimmering worlds unfamiliar, strange.
Methought you'd dipped in the flood of life
And watched the alternate flow of birth and death
That brings us across the ages to the shores
Of this world of common hopes and fears.
With wonder I saw reflected in your eyes
Dreams and visions rare, a mystery
That shone with transcendent glow and evoked
In my small, limited imprisoned self a sense
Of the marvel of creation and its majesty.

For a moment I felt I was at one
With deep passion's impersonal elemental stir
In a million hearts throughout the world.
But the moment passed and I only saw
Grey Evening, travelling with slow sad steps
To the far horizon, for a moment pause
And shoot the dusk entangled in your hair.
The darkness deepened and swamped in one common black
The wealth of colours in the sky. Far below
Festooned with lights the winding city streets
Caught in the web of light and shade a million hearts
Thirsting in weal and woe for life and yet more life.

September, 1927

Frustration

If I should love you, my dear,
And if you should love me in return,
My life will be bright with light and laughter
And my world be full of song.
You will be my companion on earth's way,
The world will shine beautiful as a dream.
Why should any one else complain
If you come and stand near my heart ?

If love in this life its crown
Should never place upon my brow,
Along the road I'll wearily march
Though your love does not light me on the way.
I will weave dreams to console my heart
And create in my mind an image of you.
In the golden temple of memory
Your beauty will shine by day and night.

Why does love in return find no love ?
Nor win your heart in exchange for mine ?
Why should not laughter laughter answer back ?
My heart is heavy with pain,
And the world is empty for lack of you.
Through the long nights I lie awake with longing,
The words and songs and gladness all around
Cease for me because you remain far away.

Friends come and smile into my eyes,
But my heart knows no response.
They go back with bitter tears
And I roam disconsolate and alone.
The rain-soaked wind is charged with restlessness.
And the murmurs of the trees are full of moans.
Shadows deepen on the sunless sky.
Magic tears glimmer in my heart.

August, 1927

The Quest

I saw it again last night and yet an illusion you insist ?
The blue flame I saw burning in the bosom of the night ?
It was late and you were all fast asleep,
The wet wind went weeping through the sleeping world,
Clouds massed from end to end upon the sky,
The *Kamini* dropped to the ground with dripping rain,
But through a rent in the sky one solitary star timidly shone,
And sleepless, I gazed at it with longing eyes.

With sudden start I saw far away a gleam of light.
In the darkness of the sombre *Sravana* night it wavered.
The reverberating roar of the clouds went booming through
the sky,
The road was wet with the dripping from the leaves of rain-
washed trees,
The flame trembled like a maiden with beating heart
As it drew nearer and nearer my sleepless vigil,
Till at last encircled by the flame I saw my lost darling.

You laugh in doubt and question my sanity ?
You deny that one who is gone can ever return ?
You say with superior air that even a mother's love
Cannot call him back whose body is one with the dust
of the earth ?

You think that I saw him only in dreams at night,
Only in dreams he called to me to go out with him ?
How, oh how can I convince you that it was no phantasy,
I did not dream : He really came to me in his car of flames ?

I will go with him : the way is dark with dreams and with
blossoms paved.
You and your bonds I defy, they will never hold me back.
Believe me or not, I do not care.

For I know who it was that called to me.
On the bright blue throne of quivering flame he sat.
Along the forest path studded with fireflies he came.
Again and again, with longing in his voice and impatiently
he called.
I will go even though you seek to keep me in your cage of
gold.

The soft lullaby I used to murmur in his ears
When gently I swayed his cradle till he slept,
His half-articulate cry of hunger till my breasts
Tingled with love for him and I put my nipples to his lips,
The laughter which lit up our eyes when we each other saw:
That song and that laughter I and my darling know, but
no one else on earth.
With that lullaby in my heart and that laughter in my eyes
I shall search him from life to life in the worlds without end.

July, 1927

Comrade

Today I remember that once I used to think
I'll build me a pleasant harbour far removed
From the world's resounding market-place :
After the day's stern struggle for the tired mind,
Weary of the incessant cross-currents of events,
A haven of rest and quiet. There will flow
Sweet and secret the words of affection kind,
Mingling with the love of kinsmen and of friends
The free and open smile of unreflecting joy.
The soft winds will murmur through the palms
And birds and blossoms make glad the earth
With song and scent. There will come to me
My love, a maiden tender, young and sweet,
With slender body like a half-open bud
Holding the promise of the spring. I will dream
My dreams of love in her dark innocent eyes,
And fill with soft murmur of fond words
The moments of leisure that with silver sail
Go drifting down the stream of time. At the end
Of the long arduous day in the outer world
I shall with tired body and weary mind
Return to her for comfort sweet to find
The peace of heaven on this earth of stress.

But today that dream is gone from me.
The flaming rays of the bright summer sun
Scorch the magic that the moonlit night
Weaves with light and shadow : in the burning heat
Of the garish day are lost the dewdrops cupped
In tender buds. Today with steadfast eyes
I look upon this world and see all life
A storm-tossed sea that lashed to angry waves
Swells with discord. No love there,

No affection to shelter from the storm,
No privacy in woe from rude, staring eyes.

There day and night beneath the open sky
The raw winds blow and tempests rise,
And along the storm-swept, rugged road
Men and women tread with fearful heart
With the precarious glow of hopes and dreams
To light them on their way. Thorny bushes wild
Cover the track, and in the darkness hiss
Serpents coiled sinister upon the road
When lightning blinds them with dazzling flash,
And from time to time the tempest gathers strength
And sinks and rises with deep-swelling roar.

She who is to be my comrade on that path
Must also march along that thorny track.
She must lift her bare head high and face the world,
Travel with fearless mind through darkest night
And endure deep pain. On the perilous way
Holding each other fast, with dauntless heart
Together journey on by night and day.
Comrade in all the dangers of the road,
Fellow-sharer in its happiness and pain,
Comforter in sorrow and the heart's own queen,
Her presence a faith and hope to the despairing soul.

April, 1927

The Sea

Wan and bloodless rose the moon
And through its gauze veil of clouds it looked
On the infinite seas. A line of movement long
Stretched to the horizon, the waters rise
In uneven waves that meet the circle of the sky,
Tossing, leaping and circling in wild career.
With long, low moans of deep suffering
The Sea throws himself in vast abandon on the shore,
Time and again he beats his head upon the sands,
While from the depths of his heart the wordless pain
Urges forward in yearning that seeks in vain
To fling out in trumpet tones what he wants to say.
The throttled sorrow seething in his breast
Twists up in wild discontent in waves
That swing and swell and rise and fall behind
The misty curtain where perilous magic rules.
Strange flames in the moving waters gleam,
Unbodied dreams of the ocean, they are dashed
Upon the sands before fulfilment comes.
With his own heart toys the cruel sea,
Scatters around his treasures in callous sport :
A reckless spendthrift who keeps no count of cost.

April, 1927

The Flower and the Sea

I wandered on the sands by the sea and watched it swinging
to and fro.

The foam glistened on the crest of the waves
And scattered in laughter upon the beach.
Suddenly the sea tossed at my feet a faded flower.

Her petals were broken by the violence of the waves.
With helpless, beseeching eyes she looked at me.
Methought it cruel that such a tiny creature should drift upon
the infinite seas.
With tender hands I lifted her up and placed her near my
heart.

But then it came to me as a sudden thought
To marry the elfish floweret to the giant sea.
Gaily I launched her upon the waves and watched her sail,
While the sea poured upon my feet its wealth of foam and
spray.

April, 1927

Spectre

Throughout the livelong night in my sleepless, solitary bed,
I weave a terrible phantasy.
Before my eyes thickens the sombre *Sravana* night with its
massed clouds and starless sky.
It no longer rains, the wind is hushed and still, and the worlds
hum with silence,
Only in the invisible darkness the swift cruel current of the
turbid river rushes on.

By its banks wanders alone a lunatic,—an aimless wanderer
with frenzied mind.
His wild eyes ominously burn : intent and questing, they glare
at the veil of solid darkness.
His matted locks wave in the air, his look is unseeing,
hard and wild, and his eyeballs glow.
Suddenly into the star-extinguished sky there rises his
anguished cry of speechless desolation.

In frenzied agony, he flings his fleshless bony arms up into
the sky and throws himself wildly upon the thorns.
Embittered by pain, alone and homeless, he wanders
disconsolate through the night, moving like a ghost among
the shadows.
In the luminous darkness, he flames before my dilated eyes,
striking terror into the inmost heart.

4 April, 1927

A Challenge

With the first light of dawn you came marching out
In quest of new ways of life. No one knows
Whether across the wastes there leads a track,
Or through thorny bushes and dark dang'rous wilds,
A bold pathfinder, you must strike new routes.
Those who dream away their days in idle luxury
Will laugh at you, and from their comfort safe
Mock your efforts with cruel taunts. Evil tongues
With bitter words will wound you to the heart
And watch your tears with unholy joy.
In the midst of insults and of mockery
Will you be able to carry bravely on ?
And with proud heart and flashing eyes
Lift up your voice in a song of victory ?

March, 1927

Prisoners

I came to your home. I thought I would beg of you
A little of the sweetness you have in your heart
To soothe the heartburn and the restlessness of life,
That the star of love might shine in my cool silent sky.

The pain which day and night burns deep in me,
The discontent and lack of peace that weigh
Like chains on the feet and check the forward urge,
Put up barriers against the heart's desire,—
The same chains, the same bonds bear heavily on you,
Your desires, your hopes return to you frustrated vain.

Baffled by the prison bars my rebellious embittered mind
Longs evil and good alike in one common ruin to hurl.
Men and women we look helpless at each others' face
And move blindly forward on the chartless path of life.

March, 1927

Doubts

I do not know why I was born, but know
I never begged for birth.
My heart is weary with effort to understand,
To know the meaning of it all. But this I feel
That whether I understand or not, I must go on
Seeking through the eternal darkness in quest of light.

That flame may nowhere shine : I do not know.
But only hear in the darkness the sound of tears,
The want, the poverty, the pangs of hunger raw,
Cruelty and injustice, and the futile rage of slaves.

Upon this heaped-up evil we yet want to base
The heaven of our dreams. Through weary night and day
Its hope sustains our hearts : But will it ever come ?
Will our sun ever shine upon the earth and night be gone ?

22 February, 1927

Wanderlust

In restless yearning I rush forward without an aim
In novel worlds to lose myself day by day,
With no fear in heart even though the way be strange,
Shedding without a thought my stored-up life of past.
The pain which smoulders deep down in the heart,
And flaming up wipes out from consciousness the light of day,
Is forgotten in the intoxication of the road
That goes to the head like liquid fire and makes me reel.

Only my pulses throb and my heart beats eagerly
In expectation of the dawn when begins my quest
And leads me away from the old familiar world
Of many memories to some new better way of life.
The margin of the world will beckon from afar,
And the infinite sky shine upon my lonely way.

January, 1927

Taj Mahal

The dream which slumbered deep down in my heart
Is washed today in light softened by evening gloom
And spreads its petals of beauty before my eyes.
What wizard hands these magic marbles shaped ?
All the world gazes in mute surprise,
And the heart is restless with vain longings of loveliness.

On the infinite, waveless ocean of unplumbed depths
You bloom a white fadeless lotus of beauty rare.
In solitary grandeur into the sky you rise
To seek for the departed dear. Nature with seasons six
Circles round your meditations rapt in cyclic dance.

The autumnal light floods tonight the sky from brim to brim
And the full moon laughs with silver sheen.
The Jumna muffles in the dark her ceaseless flow.
On her banks shine pure and pale against the deep silent sky
The dream into which Shah Jahan crystallized his tears.

September, 1926

Jahan Ara

A sufferer always, though daughter of King of Kings,
Jahan Ara, you never tasted the joys of life.

Today I stand before your grave and watch
The ghosts of the past rising in my memory.
The glory of the Moghuls lives again.
I see the Wazirs, the Amirs in gay cavalcade,
The Rajas and Maharajas with bejewelled robes
Proudly marching through the crowded streets.
Suddenly open the doors of the inner court,
And for a moment reveal
The laughter, the song and the tears that day and night
Through the marble *mahals* flow.
Quick dancing steps twinkle,
In movements sharp
Swings the *peshowaj* of colours bright,
Woven with diamonds and rubies that flash and flame
And dazzle eyes that bewildered lose themselves
In a medley of colour and fragrance and beauty and smiles.

But that is only the sparkle of surface life.
While deep below
Flow the slow silent currents of profound misery :
Two striving hearts there live with memories alone.
One had shaped in marble pure and pale
The sorrow of his heart in deathless form.
But you, Jahan Ara, a deeper suffering knew.
For you had to hide your sorrow in your smiles
To console your father dethroned and old,
And endure deep grief in utter loneliness of soul :
Out of her destitution a woman-heart
Seeking to feed the world's hunger and poverty.

You did not ask for throne nor jewels nor pearls,
Royal Beggar-Maid !
Pain, suffering, insult and imprisonment you chose
With no thought of the world and all its gifts.
Still the green grass grows upon your grave
And makes true your own last words :
'Do not grave me in marble nor in stone.
The grass which spreads like the smile of Mother Earth
Is the only covering for humble hearts.'

Who taught you, Princess,
In the courts of regal pomp and pride,
In the marble halls which templed luxury,
That splendour always finds a dusty grave ?
The realm and power faded away,
Like a dream disappeared the throne,
Through *Sismahal's* empty marble mansions weep
Day and night the echoing winds.
No steps disturb the sombre silence deep
Where like lost souls wail forgotten memories.
But unnoticed by rude and prying eyes
The green grass marches with silent steps from age to age,
Softening the dull greyness of the dust with touch of life
Like your devoted heart in a world of strife and stress.

September, 1926

After Death

Perhaps I shall lie in my forgotten unmarked grave
Far from the beaten track.
No steps shall ever sound on the wastes around
Except when from some neighbouring village a maiden bold
—Truant from home in quest of flowers wild—
Comes wandering alone with soft bare feet vermillion-dyed.
She perhaps will step upon my grave
And all at once stand still with beating heart.
From her *anchal* the flowers shower down,
But with forgetful mind
And vague sorrow stirring in her heart
Without once looking back she goes away.
Perhaps that night she'll dream of one she does not know,
And her tender mind will weep in sympathy
Of griefs of strangers and sorrows unknown to her.

No one will come to light the evening lamp upon my grave :
The kindly twilight that sounds the call of home
Will never call to me again.
I shall hear under the wintry sky
The cold wind wailing disconsolate through the trees,
And when glad spring returns with flower and song
Scattering wild blossoms upon the dust,
Even from my grave I'll long for the *Chameli*
Blooming in the liquid evening dark,
And the *Bakul* dying silently to death through all the night.

February, 1926

Evening in Bengal

It has rained all day long and now evening descends on earth.
The desolate wind goes weeping through the empty streets.
My world too feels empty and fills my heart with restlessness
For ghosts of vanished dreams flit there with evanescent pain.

The Padma with her flood of waters haunts my memory
today....
Her banks fade far away, her waters stir with strange
longings.
The sky, the flood and the hanging clouds lose their sharp
detachment
And are all lost in one common mystery on Padma's
sandy islands.

No hearths are there : no one lights the evening lamp.
Padma sits there all alone through livelong day and night.
In the darkness the winds go moaning through the reeds.
With tear-stained eyes, with slow sad steps, evening descends.

July, 1925

The Koel

Last night I heard the Koel sing at dead of night.
All the world around me slept when suddenly
In the quiet transparent dark of early spring
A stir went through earth like wind among the leaves.
Startled I heard the Koel singing far away.

In the half darkness faintly a few stars shone.
The murmur of running waters came from far.
The cuckoo's song rose loud and flooded all the sky
Till weighed with its own passion like raincharged clouds
It sank to rest and was lost in the souging wind.

I do not know where in the dark you sat among the leaves
And poured into the silent night your yearnings wild.
What deep suffering forces you to sing
And solve in your melody the bitterness and pain
That smarts in many hearts through all the world ?

In our hearts smoulder with fever heat
Fond dreams, vain desires and baffled hopes.
Young eager minds seethe with angry waves
Under dark clouds that seek to wipe out earth and sky
Till you sing and dissolve the clouds in gentle rain.

Who taught you to sing so soft and so passionately ?
Who asked you to fill the dark night with music sweet ?
Your melody softens the anguish harsh
And bathes in tears the now-tender pain
Till on laughing waters blooms a lotus washed in dew.

February, 1925.

Song at Night

The Earth stood upon the dark banks of the night
And with tired tones sang a long low dirge
Before she sank into slumber deep. One could feel
In the indistinct light the horizon far away.
Deep silence ruled over earth and sky.

On the vast deserted plain Evening came alone
With a *seenthi* of many stars shining on her brow.
The sickle moon at the far corner of the sky
Trembled with pallid rays. The dark silent earth
Surrendered to the moment's languorous lassitude.

Suddenly in that silence, in that magic dark rang out
A voice singing loud and clear. Startled I looked and saw
The pale moon bravely struggling up the steps of sky,
I heard the ascending notes soaring up the scale
Building a mansion of marvellous music in the dark.

The music swept through earth and flooding all its banks
Rushed in torrents towards the sky. With rise and fall of notes
Swaying like the sea in the eternal swing of waves,
Deepening in passion till it threatened to drown the world,
Sinking to soft notes that came and whispered to the heart.

I do not know what tune it was nor who so deeply sang
With all the passion and the sorrow of his heart
Swelling through the vast open fields in the moonlight faint.
The melody shrined the silent magic of the night,
Half-tones of joy and sorrow softened with dim surprise.

January, 1924

The Voyage

Today is the death of my old past life,
And this my last attempt you to understand.
For the last time I seek the faint gleam shyly promising love
 In your deep still eyes.
Life stood once a proud forest tree firm and strong on earth,
 And many came to me.
But struck by the thunder-bolt it withered and died
 Riven through and through.
They abandoned the derelict crumbling house and went
 Without once looking back.
Therefore with broken body and despairing heart I gaze
 Into your elusive eyes.

Who came, who smiled, and who went away in contempt,
 I shall not seek to know.
Nor those who, when death threatened deserted me
 And left me to my fate.
I shall not now at the parting of ways stop to lament
 For effort that proved futile.
What desires remain unfulfilled, what hopes I leave behind,
 I shall not count.
If only you will come and stand by me at my journey's start,
 Put your hands in mine,
I shall sail fearlessly across the waves of the sea of death
 And seek new dawn of life.

Evening may overtake us before haven we can find :
 There may be no moon :
Even the stars may be washed away in deluge of death :
 But I shall know no fear.
Let the cruel waves lift up angry hoods, terror in horrid form
 Threaten cruel death,

I shall transcend its power in the assurance of new life
And boldly forward go.
With my shattered ship I shall cross the storm-tossed sea,
And never look behind :
Sail into creation's oceans bounded with mystery
With glad song on my lips.

January, 1924

The Padma

Only for a moment on this full-moon night
After long years I meet you, River mine !
Your banks are flooded with the rains,
Day and night you sing in forgetfulness of self,
In full-brimmed flight your waters go rushing past
Waking long-drawn echoes from the shuddering banks.

The banks groan and gasp under your terrific blows,
But in concentrated self-centredness
You go indulging in your sport of death.
Do you remember the long years that have passed
Since the day when in exultation of tumultuous joy
You broke through your prison walls and ventured out ?

From then on alone you've travelled in sorrow and joy
To flow day and night without rest or pause.
The dim banks fade far away and music murmurs.
Sometimes the *Sravana* floods descend in splendour,
Sometimes the autumnal moon resplendent stands,
Sometimes the spring comes expectant.

Have you yet found the lover at whose call
—Lured from your childhood's home like a deer
Bewitched by the notes of the hunter's pipe—
You came rushing out with wildly beating heart ?
The evenings follow the long weary days,
Moonlit nights seek momentary rest on earth.

Yet you flow on and on unceasingly,
Speaking soft words of solace to your troubled heart.
But your wild spirit beats and will know no bonds,
The screams of lightning flash upon the sky,
In your mind and body stirs the dance of death,
The banks tremble and shudder in your fatal embrace locked.

A serpent hissing in wrath you lift
Your hood of waves to strike the cruel sky,—
In futile rage ! The sky stays safe above,
With ironic laughter it mocks your efforts vain,
From horizon to horizon pours the moon's radiance,
The morning light brings beauty to the dust of the earth.

Your wounded heart swells within your breast :
Madly you rush out in quest of new ways of life.
The waters are churned grey in your frenzy wild,
Seething with rage in devil's dance you beat
At dusk and dawn upon the banks that crack
And faint into your flow with long lamenting moans.

Still can you laugh like this with such a moon ?
Sorrow's softest murmur lingers in your heart tonight,
And yet you wear the moonlight's smile upon your lips ?
I love this your smile in suffering :
Methinks the snows heaped upon the mountain tops
Are frozen tears and yet in the morning sun
Laugh in golden glory : the joy of life in man
Yearns upwards from the depths of the sea of pain.
If laughter there were none in this our suffering world
The buds would have died to dust before the blossoms came,
And dim evening for ever dwelt upon this earth
Making the heart grey with sad tired notes.



But now in your heart the current stirs again
And floating from far away the faint murmurs come.
In the swift sharp current let all suffering fade,
In the sound of movement the moaning of the heart be lost
Till pervading all consciousness there remain alone
The sense of continual flow—the haunting smile of grief.

September, 1923

